

**REPORT
FROM THE
INSPECTORATE**

Alton College

March 1995

**THE
FURTHER
EDUCATION
FUNDING
COUNCIL**

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

The Further Education Funding Council has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education every four years. The inspectorate also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum and gives advice to FEFC's quality assessment committee.

College inspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circular 93/28. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge and experience in the work they inspect. Inspection teams normally include at least one member who does not work in education and a member of staff from the college being inspected.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

The procedures for assessing quality are set out in the Council Circular 93/28. During their inspection, inspectors assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Their assessments are set out in the reports. They also use a five-point grading scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses. The descriptors for the grades are:

- grade 1 – provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses*
- grade 2 – provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- grade 3 – provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses*
- grade 4 – provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- grade 5 – provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.*

*Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT
Telephone 01203 863000
Fax 01203 863100*

FEFC INSPECTION REPORT 26/95

ALTON COLLEGE

SOUTH EAST REGION

Inspected May – November 1994

Summary

Alton College is a tertiary college in north-east Hampshire to which students are attracted by its reputation for academic success. It has the support of active and committed governors and is well managed. Liaison with parents and local schools is good. Well-qualified and enthusiastic staff provide teaching of high quality. Students achieve excellent results in external examinations and are offered a rich programme of sporting, musical and community service activities. The accommodation is of a high standard with good access for students with limited mobility. The college should complete the implementation of its quality assurance system, improve its management information systems, ensure that student guidance and tutorial support are of uniformly high quality, and extend the counselling service for students.

The grades awarded as a result of the inspection are given below.

Aspects of cross-college provision	Grade
Responsiveness and range of provision	2
Governance and management	2
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	3
Quality assurance	4
Resources: staffing	2
equipment/learning resources	2
accommodation	2

Curriculum area	Grade	Curriculum area	Grade
Mathematics	1	Applied social studies	3
Technology	2	English and communications	2
Human and natural sciences	1	Modern languages	2
Social science	2		
Business studies	2	Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities	2
Creative and performing arts	2		

CONTENTS

	Paragraph
Summary	
Introduction	1
The college and its aims	3
Responsiveness and range of provision	9
Governance and management	23
Students' recruitment, guidance and support	36
Teaching and the promotion of learning	47
Students' achievements	58
Quality assurance	70
Resources	81
Conclusions and issues	103
Figures	

INTRODUCTION

1 Alton College in Hampshire was inspected in the summer and autumn terms of the 1993-94 and 1994-95 academic years, respectively. The inspection team of five full-time inspectors and eight part-time inspectors spent a total of 53 days in the college. Inspection of curriculum areas was carried out in the weeks beginning 9 and 16 May. The college's provision for induction and enrolment was observed at the beginning of September. Work with students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was inspected in October. Cross-college issues were inspected in the week beginning 28 November.

2 Inspectors visited 144 learning sessions and examined a representative sample of students' written and practical work. There were meetings with governors, parents, local employers, representatives of the local community, of partner schools, of the Hampshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and with college managers, teaching and support staff and students.

THE COLLEGE AND ITS AIMS

3 Alton College opened as a purpose-built sixth form college in 1978, following a general reorganisation of secondary provision. It was redesignated as a tertiary college in 1983 in order to develop a vocational curriculum for the 16-19 age group. Adult non-vocational education was added to its responsibilities in 1984 and, following incorporation, the college has attempted to widen its remit to include adult vocational training and short courses for industry. Students are drawn principally from four partner schools and other maintained schools which lie within a radius of 15 miles from the college. It also has a significant intake from the independent sector and from some Surrey schools.

4 The college is now housed on one site following major building programmes during the period 1983-94. The college is within walking distance of Alton town centre, and is one of only two public sector institutions providing post-16 education in eastern Hampshire. The other is an 11-18 grant-maintained school in Petersfield. Both are members of the East Hampshire Adult Non-Vocational Partnership.

5 The college employs 367 staff. Eighty-six of these (six full-time equivalents) are engaged wholly in adult non-vocational work. A staff profile, with staff expressed as full-time equivalents, is shown in figure 1. Full-time enrolments have increased five-fold in the past 16 years. At the time of the inspection, there were 3,795 on roll. Of these, 1,327 were full-time students aged 16-19. The majority of full-time students are on General Certificate of Education advanced level (GCE A level) programmes but there has been a steady increase in vocational enrolments. The college operates in a market for full-time students which is highly competitive. Since incorporation, a 13 per cent increase in enrolments has been achieved.

6 The college is organised into nine curriculum sections which provide a broad range of GCE advanced and advanced supplementary (GCE A/AS) level courses, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) courses and vocational programmes. The sections are: creative and performing arts; English and communications; modern languages; mathematics; technology; human and natural sciences; social science; applied social studies; and business studies. A tenth section, Wey Valley Business School, has been established recently to develop the full-cost and professional course work of the college. It operates in conjunction with AB Training Ltd, with which the college has close links, in offering TEC-funded programmes. Enrolments by age and level of study are shown in figures 2 and 3, respectively. Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area are shown in figure 4.

7 Alton and its catchment area are within commuting distance of central London and of Guildford, Portsmouth, Winchester and Basingstoke. Unemployment stands at 6 per cent. Almost 90 per cent of firms in the area employ fewer than 25 people. The college itself is the major employer in Alton and one of the principal employers in east Hampshire.

8 The aim of the college is to provide 'flexible' access to further education and training of the highest quality. It encourages the self motivation and creativity of its students as a means to personal fulfilment and as preparation for citizenship and the next stage of education and employment, recognises the potential of all staff to contribute to the success of the college by encouraging their development, and seeks to sustain an affordable local service by efficient use of its resources.

RESPONSIVENESS AND RANGE OF PROVISION

9 The college offers 31 GCE A level and six AS subjects, primarily for 16-19 year olds. These courses form the bulk of its provision. Twelve GCSE subjects are also available. A growing number of GCE A level and GCSE subjects are offered to adults for part-time day or evening study. Some subjects are offered through correspondence courses supplemented by individual tuition.

10 Since incorporation the college has expanded its range of programmes to include General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) at all three levels. There are now intermediate and advanced GNVQs in business, leisure and tourism, art and design, and health and social care. GNVQ foundation courses are also being offered in business and health and social care. Other courses include a two-year continuing education course for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; a City and Guilds (C&G) basic engineering course; Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) first and national diploma in engineering courses; and full-time and part-time access courses for entry to higher education. The college's basic education programme includes numberpower and wordpower, English for speakers of other languages, lip-reading and signing. Non-vocational classes are provided in

partnership with the Petersfield Community Centre and The Petersfield School. The college is the main centre in east Hampshire for basic training in food hygiene. It also offers courses in Turkish for the benefit of Turkish restaurant owners. There are plans to increase vocational and foundation provision over the next two years.

11 The college established its Wey Valley Business School in August 1994 to promote full-cost courses and services for companies. The school offers 18 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) from levels 1 to 4, including Training and Development Lead Body assessor awards.

12 The college regularly consults the local TEC about the needs of local employers. Destination reports for 16 year old school leavers are obtained from Hampshire County Council to help the college identify areas of study for which there may be a demand. The introduction of the BTEC national diploma in nursery nursing was launched as a result of this. The GCE A level religious studies course was started following market research with the local schools and the local education authority (LEA). A National Examining Board for Supervisory Management course is being set up in response to enquiries received by the Wey Valley Business School.

13 Feedback from users of the Wey Valley Business School influences curricular planning but the school lacks adequate formal mechanisms to gauge students' and employers' satisfaction accurately. AB Training Ltd has offices at the college and the company partially funded recent car park and library extensions. The speed of response of Alton College staff to enquiries about training was cited by AB Training Ltd as the reason for commissioning courses from the college.

14 The college is a member of the North-East Hampshire Education Business Partnership and is committed to providing work experience for students whenever possible. Local business representatives praised the college's organisation and evaluation of work placements.

15 Curriculum enrichment is provided through a variety of sports and complementary studies which are available to the majority of full-time students. Students participate in drama productions, choirs, chamber orchestras, wind bands, a brass group, a jazz group, a rock school, a range of team sports, sailing, first aid, life-saving, photography, overseas visits and exchanges, and various forms of service in the community. These programmes are voluntary and about 40 per cent of the students participate. Such activities have had no accreditation in the past but the college is now seeking recognition for them through the Open College. Students have achieved a number of successes including individual and team victories in a Hampshire golf tournament open to all educational establishments. One student played in the finals of the Schools Prom. Students have played for the county at cricket, hockey and football. A local radio station has broadcast work by college musicians.

16 The college campus provides community facilities in its Forum Hall. This is used, amongst other things, for local authority planning committee

meetings, musical events and an annual 'foundation lecture' given by a national figure. Theatrical events, held in the college drama studio, are attended by the public. The college musical and theatrical productions provide students with valuable public performance experience. Sports competitions for local children are organised by college students and student art work is displayed in the local art Gallery. Students have conducted a number of surveys for local organisations such as community radio. Alton's Town Forum is attended by members of the college who have been active in initial discussions about 'twinning' with a European town. An important feature of the student year is the annual holiday for underprivileged children from London which takes place each summer. It is financed by funds raised throughout the year by the students. The college has its own creche.

17 Liaison with local schools and parents is good. The college has a full breakdown of the number of students recruited from each school, the targets for recruitment, the numbers interviewed and the actual enrolments. Parents have a high regard for the quality of college courses. They receive a handbook and a monthly newsletter and have the opportunity to attend open evenings at which current students present information about courses to applicants. Pupils in their final year of schooling can attend the college to sample lessons, or to shadow students, before making decisions about future courses. The quality of the information which the college provides to local schools is good. It includes documentation on the college and its courses, and presentations by the director of studies, senior tutors, specialist staff and ex-pupils. College staff now also brief schools on GNVQ opportunities. Individualised newsletters are sent to local schools with specific details of the achievements of their ex-pupils at Alton College and, later, in higher education. The college is highly thought of by the TEC, students, parents and community representatives.

18 There are good links with higher education. The college is a member of the Surrey Compact which promotes progression to five Surrey higher education institutions through routes such as access courses, BTEC and GNVQ qualifications.

19 The college has a strong commitment to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Buildings are all single storey and were purpose built to make them accessible to wheelchair users. There are close links with the Lord Mayor Treloar College, a national centre for physically disabled people, which is located nearby. The college actively encourages applications from students with disabilities and is represented by staff and corporation members on the Alton and Petersfield post-16 Special Education Needs Forum which includes social services, the health authority, schools and AB Training Ltd. This forum is in turn represented on the larger North Hampshire Special Education Needs Forum. The college also participates in a planning group for day services in the local area.

20 Academic programmes are effectively marketed and subjects with a low take-up are reviewed. Some GCE A level subjects have been discontinued as a result, and the catering course was closed in 1991 following a steady decline in student numbers. Marketing materials include full-time and part-time prospectuses, course leaflets and a video. The full-time prospectus is written to appeal to 16-19 year olds while the part-time prospectus focuses on the adult learner. There is little or no cross-reference between the two prospectuses and they are of markedly different quality in terms of presentation. The college should ensure that in targeting its different audiences it does not give the mistaken impression that it values some applicants more than others.

21 The part-time prospectus is delivered to all households in the local area by post. Research into employers' training requirements and the potential of the adult market is not well developed. Full-time equivalent enrolments for part-time courses are less than 14 per cent of the total. The college's capacity to attract students who require more flexible patterns of course delivery would be strengthened if open-learning materials were developed on a college-wide basis.

22 Staff are aware of the National Targets for Education and Training and the related college targets. They are also aware of the commitment of the college to increase student numbers in response to Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) targets. Staff realise that growth will best be achieved by increasing the numbers of adult students but there is variable understanding of the need to develop more flexible modes of learning and to increase the proportion of vocational work as a means to this end.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

23 The corporation board has 17 members. They include 10 independent and four co-opted members who are drawn from business, the professions and the armed forces, two members of the college staff, a student and a nominee from the TEC. The principal is an ex-officio member of the board. At the time of the inspection, there were three vacancies. The corporation has a clear committee structure with appropriate terms of reference which are reviewed periodically. Members receive carefully-prepared committee papers and briefings which help them to play an active role in meetings. The vice-principal produces regular reports on the progress the college is making in meeting its aims and objectives. Student matters are a standing agenda item for every board meeting and the board's minutes show the importance which members attach to these.

24 The board is supportive of the principal and the management team. Members are fully aware of their changed roles since incorporation and take a close interest in the work of the college without trespassing on the functions of the executive. The chairman visits each of the departments annually for an informal meeting with staff. Several members take an active part in areas of the college which particularly interest them. Staff

appreciate this attention. The corporation is rightly proud of the achievements of the college but is not complacent.

25 Most staff were involved in devising the current strategic plan, although some teachers had only minimal influence on it. Support staff were generally less aware of its development than teaching staff. Each department, and each section within it, has a development plan linked to the strategic plan. Governors were properly involved in the preparation and approval of the plan.

26 There are policies for health and safety and for equal opportunities. Responsibilities for their implementation have been allocated. There is no comprehensive policy for student support and the college should remedy this. The college does not have a policy relating to environmental issues. There is no mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of policies.

27 There is a clear management structure. The principal's management group which meets once a week consists of the principal, vice-principal, assistant principal and director of studies. The principal's leadership is supportive and reflects a regard for high standards. The senior managers work well as a team. Among other things the vice-principal has responsibility for strategic and business plans, quality assurance and the curriculum. The assistant principal has responsibility for finance, management information systems and premises. The director of studies takes the lead on marketing, admissions, the tutorial system and pastoral and careers support.

28 There are three heads of department. In addition to managing a curriculum area, each has a cross-college responsibility. The heads of department are responsible to the vice-principal for the management of their departments. For their cross-college duties each reports to a different member of the principal's management group. The head of arts reports to the principal, the head of science to the assistant principal and the head of social and business studies to the vice-principal. These arrangements work well. The curriculum departments are divided into sections led by section heads.

29 The scope of work assigned to the assistant principal has recently been altered and further changes are planned. The postholder will be hard pressed to maintain the current wide range of responsibilities whilst introducing a new financial and management information system.

30 The full-time students are organised into tutor groups. Tutors report to one of six senior tutors who are in turn responsible to the director of studies. Senior tutors lead groups of 14 or 15 tutors, teach for approximately 15 hours a week, liaise with one of the local schools, interview personally all applicants from that school, are themselves tutors and sometimes hold cross-college responsibilities. There is evidence that they cannot adequately discharge this range of work. For example, because senior tutors also have tutor groups, they are not available during the

tutorial times when an increasing number of students want to see them. They are frequently only available during lunch hours or at break times because of their teaching timetables and some students inevitably, cannot be seen immediately, sometimes without an opportunity for determining whether or not their need for an appointment is urgent.

31 Internal communication is effective. The principal issues newsletters to all staff, holds regular full staff meetings and meets annually with the heads of section in each department. Heads of department meet each week with the vice-principal and director of studies. Each head of department holds regular meetings with heads of section and they, in turn, meet regularly with teaching staff. Most of these meetings are appropriately minuted, which is helpful to part-time staff who cannot attend all meetings. Staff report that they are mostly well informed, though some support staff have difficulty attending meetings because of shift work or difficulties with cover arrangements.

32 Resources are effectively deployed. Budgets are calculated according to a recognised formula and allocated to heads of department under the headings of consumables, staff development and part-time teachers. Budget allocations are equitable and open. Clear, monthly expenditure reports are provided to help managers monitor their budgets. The college plans to introduce fully-devolved budgets and is considering the staff training required. It has not yet calculated unit costs.

33 College-wide enrolment targets are set and monitored. Examination results and destinations data are collated, systematically analysed and published. The college also calculates annual retention rates. Student data was checked on a sample basis during the inspection and found to be accurate.

34 Data are derived from disparate systems which work at different speeds and do not interface. The college has a well-considered information enhancement strategy. There are plans for its implementation and a staff-training scheme to support it.

35 The college's average level of funding for 1994-95 is £17.15 per unit. The median for general further education and tertiary colleges is £18.17. The college's income and expenditure for the 16 months to July 1994 are shown in figures 5 and 6.

STUDENTS' RECRUITMENT, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

36 The college has an effective system for recruiting full-time students with which parents and students are generally well satisfied. Each of the six senior tutors has responsibility for a particular school where they conduct all the interviews. The system provides consistency of interview practice within each school, but the involvement of other tutors in first interviews would help to lighten the load on senior tutors. Students would in some cases benefit from more contact with college staff between initial interview and eventual enrolment. Parents and students suggest that full-

time course leaflets should supply more detailed information on the content and structure of individual courses.

37 The recruitment of part-time students is largely conducted through mailshots. While this strategy is broadly successful, prospective students need more detail about vocational part-time courses to enable them to make informed choices.

38 There is a sound induction system for full-time students which includes ice-breaking activities, course and college orientation, an introduction to the library and a tour of the college. Students also receive copies of the students' handbook which contains the college charter and are given personal timetables. The handbook includes details of the college's disciplinary system and students' rights. Students pursuing GNVQ courses are provided with specific academic appeals procedures. A study skills and examination techniques booklet, subject study guides and guidance notes are also provided during induction. Early in the first term, the college organises an evening specifically for parents of students who enrolled in September to provide, among other things, more detail about GNVQ courses and the accreditation of students' prior learning.

39 Attendance levels at the college are generally high. There is a thorough system of monitoring and reporting on absence. The college is responsive to students' requests to change courses and is effective in ensuring that such decisions are carefully made. It is also piloting an electronic registration system.

40 Parents and students speak highly of the quality of student support. Full-time students have timetabled tutorials and staff give generously of their time for individual tutoring at lunch-time and other unprogrammed periods. The tutorial system is supported by procedures to alert staff and parents to absences, falling work-rates and poor performance. Diaries and calendars of important events are produced. Five separate weeks in the year are devoted to monitoring and reporting. There are regular parents' evenings and there is systematic maintenance by students of records of achievement. The college strives to inculcate a sense of personal responsibility for study in its students. A system which requires full-time students to report on their own progress at the end of their first term is designed to support this.

41 While some part-time students enjoy an appropriate level of support, others at present do not, and the college should review its tutorial support for part-time students.

42 The college's confidential counselling service is under resourced. The independent counsellor attends only two half days per week and students sometimes have to wait three weeks for a confidential interview. The location of the counselling room is inappropriate: students in distress have to wait in full view of others using the adjacent careers area.

43 Careers guidance for full-time students is well resourced. Its staffing provision includes the secondment, for 2.5 days per week, of a Hampshire

County Council careers officer. Those students who are interested in progressing to higher education are better served than those seeking employment. The resources available in the careers centre should be improved to cater more effectively for the increasing numbers of students on vocational courses.

44 Part-time students are provided with sets of information based primarily upon the Hampshire Information Tracking System, and computerised careers databases. Although the adult student handbook refers to the careers centre, some part-time students are ill informed about its resources. They also report problems in contacting specialist staff and in being able to use the computer software.

45 The college has recently promoted to a senior tutorship its long-standing named person with specific responsibilities for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Students with severe disabilities are accompanied at all times by trained staff from the local specialist residential school with which the college has strong links. Both students and parents speak highly of the dyslexia centre which provides excellent support. The college has suitable arrangements for students with health problems. There are learning support workshops for English and mathematics, although these are currently underused.

46 The college has first-aid provision available during all its opening times but information to students on how to summon first-aid is inadequate. Publicity for emergency procedures should also be improved.

TEACHING AND THE PROMOTION OF LEARNING

47 The quality of the work inspected was high. Of the 144 teaching sessions inspected 78 per cent had strengths which clearly outweighed weaknesses. None of the classes seen were graded 4 or 5. The most consistently good practice was found in human and natural sciences, mathematics and technology. The following table summarises the grades given to the teaching sessions inspected.

Teaching sessions: inspection grades by programme of study

Programmes	Grade 1	2	3	4	5	Number of sessions
GCE AS/A level	20	51	15	0	0	86
GCSE	1	8	2	0	0	11
GNVQ	0	8	4	0	0	12
NVQ	0	1	1	0	0	2
Other	5	19	9	0	0	33
Total	26	87	31	0	0	144

48 Teaching was well planned, organised and executed. Most departments had well-prepared schemes of work which, in the best practice, were closely matched to syllabus objectives, showed evidence of careful sequencing of topics and were followed consistently by staff teams.

Attention was also paid to the need, in some subjects, to help students to make the transition from GCSE to A level. The science section, for example, provides starter packs for its new students. The modern languages section requires all its students to follow a 10-week linguistics course in their first term which helps them to understand the structure of language and develop skills to promote their progress and achievement.

49 Most teaching sessions were conducted at an appropriate pace. Students experienced a growing sense of achievement. They responded well to the high expectations of their teachers. Teachers employed a variety of appropriate methods including talking to the class, brief and extended presentations by students, small and large group discussion with feedback, whole-group discussion, role play and drama. A wide range of teaching aids was used including video, overhead projectors, handouts, wall-charts, flipcharts, completion sheets, newspapers and magazines. In a theatre studies session, students used music stands imaginatively to suggest dancing partners. In an English language session, students considered the way a story might be headlined and written up in a range of different newspapers: as a basis for discussion, they used real papers to illustrate their decisions and then wrote the articles.

50 Teachers struck a good balance between oral and written work. Good questioning techniques were used, not only to aid students' understanding but also to draw them into discussion. This helped create good rapport between students and staff, based on an atmosphere of trust. In the best practice, teachers drew upon students' own experiences for illustration of topics under discussion. In modern languages, frequent use of the language being studied, often made more realistic by a foreign assistant, greatly assisted learning. In science, a revision lesson was cleverly structured so that, after presentation of key ideas by the teacher, students found themselves working in groups using those ideas in a new situation. This problem-solving approach powerfully reinforced their learning.

51 Assessment was planned, in most cases, so that students clearly understood what was expected of them. Teachers had a good knowledge of syllabus content and of assessment requirements. Marking was careful, consistent and supportive. Students knew how well they had done and what action was needed to improve their performance. In one lesson, examination papers were returned to students so that they could award themselves marks for their corrected work, using the relevant board's mark scheme, and thus reach a better understanding of standards. There are some good examples of co-ordination between teachers to ensure that students are not faced with identical dates for the submission of assignments. In the poorer examples of assessment practice, there was insufficient written comment from teachers and inadequate attention to spelling and punctuation.

52 Some staff showed skill in student profiling. In a GNVQ class, for example, students were engaged in individual work with the teacher to finalise their portfolios of achievement. They were coached individually in

a supportive but thorough manner. The teacher was careful not to be prescriptive or to complete the task for the student. As the session progressed, students' understanding of the nature and purpose of the task grew. By the end of it, they had the confidence to pursue the task to its conclusion by themselves.

53 In some curriculum areas, students were encouraged to take some responsibility for organising their own learning by using study plans, long-term assignments and open learning materials. These students had good access to additional support from enthusiastic subject teachers who gave freely of their time out of normal hours. In the science and mathematics department, a student workshop has been established in the entrance to the department, adjacent to the staff work area, to give students ready access to extra tuition.

54 Those students involved in work experience found that it helped them to make progress in their studies. Placements were well organised. They contributed much to the learning process and were highly spoken of by students.

55 Adult students are well served by the college. Teachers are sensitive to their needs, make good use of their experience, and use teaching methods which are appropriate.

56 In a small number of classes, the quality of the students' experience was limited by teachers' poor management of group work. Some discussions were allowed to go on after they had ceased to be productive. In a few instances, the bulk of the class remained virtually silent while a small number of students were active in discussion. Teachers need to work harder with some students to help them contribute effectively in large groups. On the other hand some groups were so small that they offered no opportunity for debate. Project work would, on some occasions, have been more successful if clearly-defined expectations, assessment criteria and completion dates had been stated.

57 There were some examples of notes being unnecessarily dictated to students and of students being required to copy notes from the board or the overhead projector when a handout would have been more appropriate. Although there were good examples of the use of information technology in the classroom, opportunities were also being missed. The value of practical work was sometimes limited by lack of space or quantity of equipment, although work with students was always carried out safely and effectively.

STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

58 Students' achievements in public examinations are good. Students aged 16-18 entered for GCE AS/A level examinations in 1993-94 scored, on average, 5.9 points per subject entry. This places the college among the top 10 per cent of colleges in the further education sector on this measure based on the data in the 1994 performance tables published by

the Department for Education. It also places Alton College first in Hampshire. Ninety-three per cent of students in their final year of study on the vocational courses included in the Department for Education's 1994 performance tables were successful. This places the college among the top third of colleges in the further education sector on this measure.

59 In presenting its own results, the college distinguishes between those courses directed primarily at adults and those for 16-19 year olds. Both groups achieved results which were significantly above national averages. The provisional GCE A level pass rates for all general further education and tertiary colleges in 1994 were 72 per cent for 18 year old students and 62 per cent for students 19 years old or over. The 16-19 year old students at the college achieved an average pass rate at GCE A level of 91 per cent in 1994, a figure very similar to those for 1992 and 1993. In five subjects all the students entered for the examination in 1994 passed. In only seven subjects out of 22 did the pass rate fall below 90 per cent. At GCE AS level the overall pass rates were 93 per cent in 1994 and 94 per cent in 1993. The achievements of adults at GCE A level have improved from an already high pass rate of 84 per cent in 1993, to 89 per cent in 1994. At GCE AS level the comparable figures were 92 per cent in 1993 and 90 per cent in 1994.

60 The college's GCSE results, particularly those for adult students, were also well above national averages. Students aged 16-19 achieved pass rates of 71 per cent in 1993 and 52 per cent in 1994. GCSE pass rates for adult students were 80 per cent and 81 per cent for 1993 and 1994, respectively, and there were many outstanding results in individual subjects.

61 BTEC national diploma passes have varied in the years 1992 to 1994 between 69 and 90 per cent and have in all cases been close to, or above, the national averages published by BTEC. All students studying for the national diploma in engineering have achieved the award in each of the years 1992, 1993 and 1994. The respective figures for social care students are 100 per cent, 91 per cent and 92 per cent; for business and finance students they are 100 per cent, 100 per cent and 95 per cent.

62 The college enters students for a wide range of other vocational and professional examinations and achieves good results. For example, GNVQ intermediate health and social care students achieved pass rates of 97 per cent in 1993 and 93 per cent in 1994. For the same years, the basic food hygiene certificate was achieved by 100 per cent and 98 per cent of students respectively. Both access to higher education students and those seeking the wine appreciation certificate have achieved 100 per cent pass rates in each of the last three years.

63 Students speak with enthusiasm about their studies. The work demanded of them is challenging. They are aware of teachers' high expectations of them and they exhibit a growing sense of confidence as their courses progress. Students attain good levels of understanding in

their subjects and show an ability to apply this in new contexts. There is a very good rapport between students and staff which is particularly marked in the case of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

64 Appropriate communication and number skills are acquired by the majority of students. Some students find problems in accessing computers in the independent learning centre and, in consequence, the development of their information technology skills suffers.

65 In human and natural science, and in technology, practical work was carried out competently and safely. Some technology students expressed disappointment that there was not more practical work on BTEC courses. Modern language students' competence and confidence in the use of the relevant language increases rapidly. In most practical classes students could be relied upon to work conscientiously at their own pace.

66 Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities progress well from specialist to mainstream courses. Once integrated into mainstream courses they achieve well alongside their peers. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are able to achieve recognised qualifications such as NVQ units. However, students' achievements within courses are not always documented. Recording should be improved to ensure that recognition is given to small but significant steps in achievement.

67 Subject retention rates are good. Among full-time GCE A level students they have varied between 83 per cent and 88 per cent over the academic years 1991-92 and 1993-94. The figures for full-time national diploma courses over the same periods range between 85 per cent and 88 per cent. The lowest retention rates are in modern languages (in particular French and German), access to higher education courses and some GNVQ courses. One-year full-time subject retention rates are slightly lower than for two-year subjects, varying between 78 per cent and 88 per cent, and retention rates for one-year part-time courses range from 39 per cent to 100 per cent. The college is currently attempting to establish exactly when and why students leave or change their course.

68 The college has taken the decision not to subscribe to the national Advanced Level Information System. Work is proceeding to establish an in-house system that will measure the value added to students' achievements during their time at the college.

69 In order to gain a full picture of the achievements of its students the college makes considerable efforts to establish their destinations on leaving. In the 1993 destinations survey only 62 out of 686 destinations remained unknown to the college. Such information is used, among other things, as a marketing tool and, with this in mind, both the higher education destinations of its leavers and their eventual degree results are published. In 1993, 55 per cent of all students leaving the college, including 77 per cent of GCE A level leavers, went on to higher education; 23 per cent continued in further education and 16 per cent went directly to employment. Students aspiring to higher education through routes other

than GCE A level perform well. In 1993, 53 per cent of BTEC national diploma students and 76 per cent of full-time access students achieved a place in higher education.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

70 The college consulted widely in preparing its own charter, which was introduced at the beginning of this academic year. Students' awareness of its content varies. It was introduced to them at tutorials but not all tutors covered it adequately. Many parents had not recognised the college charter although it was incorporated in the parents' handbook.

71 Although the college has a clear commitment to improve academic standards, a commitment manifest in the high quality of students' achievements, formal arrangements to assure quality are only now being introduced. Course review has been in place for a number of years. Practice was determined by the priorities of individual departments and by the interests of particular members of staff. The college has now devised a system which it requires all departments to follow. There is a quality statement and action plan in the college's strategic plan. The appointment of a college quality manager should ensure that the new system is operated according to guidelines.

72 The first round of course reviews using the new guidelines is now taking place. It is overseen by two committees. They are the course review committee for GCE AS/A level and GCSE courses and other single subjects, and the internal verification committee for GNVQ and NVQ programmes. Both committees report to the academic board.

73 The guidelines continue to allow some variation of practice to suit the needs of different subjects. The college is moving carefully towards harmonisation of previously disparate practices, seeking to harness existing strengths. For GCE A/AS level and GCSE subjects there is a four-year rolling programme of review. Departments propose courses for review. The academic board then decides which shall be included, subject to the right of the corporation to modify or add to the list. In selecting courses for review, the academic board or the corporation have regard to a number of factors. These include the positive performance of a course, the poor performance of a course or the fact that significant changes have taken place. Following the significant decline in GCSE results between 1993 and 1994, the academic board commissioned a review of the whole of the GCSE provision, which is now in progress.

74 Vocational courses are reviewed annually. This year, the internal verification committee examined GNVQ assessment methods and agreed a modified appeals procedure. There is also an annual review of statistical performance indicators for every course, which is carried out within departments and reported to the academic board.

75 The quality assurance system is intended to involve students in course review. However, most students are unaware that they can contribute to the design and quality of the curriculum because the system is so new that only a small number of courses have been reviewed. It is now the college's policy that there shall be an annual survey of students' perceptions of the college's performance against criteria set out in its charter.

76 Moderators' and verifiers' reports, and reports from examination boards, are considered by the internal verification committee and the course review committee. There is little formal involvement of employers or community representatives in course review. The college is seeking to obtain contributions from these groups by working with the Hampshire TEC. The TEC has also been helping the college to work towards achievement of the Investors in People award. An initial assessment of the college was made in autumn 1993. This resulted in an action plan which was received by the academic board in March 1994 and agreed by the corporation at its meeting in July 1994. The college intends that final assessment will take place in December 1995 and the process is on schedule.

77 Quality assurance across the college is at an early stage of evolution. College quality standards and targets are not yet generally established. It is too early to assess whether or not the new structure will be effective, particularly because the management information system on whose efficiency it will depend is itself still under development. However, the college's plans appear sound.

78 The college strategy for quality assurance includes staff appraisal and development procedures for both academic and support staff. Academic staff appraisal is now in its first full round of implementation and is partially completed. The appraisal scheme for support staff will start in the current academic year. A handbook and guidance notes have been drawn up and agreed.

79 The staff-development programme includes a process of induction and mentoring for all new staff. The few who have experienced it have found it relevant and helpful. There is a well-documented staff-development policy which lays down the procedures to be followed. These include the means by which needs are to be identified and evaluation of what has been achieved. A wide range of staff development is taking place including subject updating, development of curriculum design skills, management training, appraisal training and preparation for GNVQ assessment and verification through the Training and Development Lead Body awards scheme. For support staff, development has included customer care, food handling, wordprocessing and effective contribution to the improvement of the management information system. Staff development is generously funded at about 2 per cent of payroll, which this year amounts to approximately £70,000.

80 A quality-assessment report was produced by the college for the inspection. It describes the current state of development of the quality assurance system and the action that is being taken to achieve more effective procedures. The report is wide-ranging but insufficiently evaluative.

RESOURCES

Staffing

81 There are 77.8 full-time academic staff, 27.7 full-time equivalent part-time academic staff and 44.7 full-time equivalent support staff. They are appropriately deployed. Average lecturer hours are 19.3 hours per week. They have remained at approximately this level for the last five years. The student:staff ratio for 1993-94 was 15.5:1.

82 The college has established a personnel section which is headed by a manager responsible to the vice-principal. There is a recruitment and selection policy, and a procedures document which sets out clear processes for identifying and agreeing posts and for the selection and appointment of staff.

83 The four members of the principal's management group and three heads of department are all men. Fifty-eight per cent of senior lecturers are men. Overall, 52 per cent of the full-time academic staff are men. Of the support staff, 24 per cent are men and 76 per cent women. No data is available on the proportion of staff recruited from minority ethnic groups.

84 Teachers are well qualified and enthusiastic and most operate as both subject specialists and personal tutors. They are committed to their students. Eighty-two per cent of the full-time academic staff have first degrees and 21 per cent higher degrees, whilst 95 per cent have a recognised teaching qualification. Thirty-six per cent have also achieved the Training and Development Lead Body assessor and/or verifier qualification. About 32 per cent of the staff are aged under 40 years.

85 There are few full-time teachers with industrial or commercial experience. The college relies heavily on part-time teachers to bring current industrial and commercial expertise to the curriculum. In several areas, however, part-time teachers significantly outnumber full-time staff; for example in applied social studies, social science, creative and performing arts and business studies. This large number of part-time teachers places a substantial management load on a minority of section heads.

86 Support staff play a key role in all academic departments, particularly art, engineering, information technology and the sciences. They make a strong contribution to the support of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In general, the level of support is good. In modern languages, an increase in the use of language assistants would bring benefits.

Equipment/learning resources

87 The college has a good range of general-purpose teaching aids. Most classrooms have an adequate selection of visual aids such as overhead projectors, screens and boards. General-purpose classrooms are suitably furnished and most corridor areas and classrooms are carpeted.

88 In most curriculum areas, the provision of specialist equipment is adequate. In some areas, it is good. The best examples were identified in art, engineering, modern languages, business studies and social science. There has been significant investment in engineering; for example the purchase of a centre lathe and the improvement of some of the welding facilities. Science lacks data-recording facilities and there is a need to upgrade the electronic equipment in engineering.

89 The college has a capital equipment replacement programme. This is related to current priorities identified in the strategic plan. The three academic departments and the central administration bid for funding. The principal's management group draws up a priority list for the corporation's approval.

90 Fifty-four per cent of current capital investment has been spent on improving various aspects of information technology. The quality and availability of information technology facilities are good in business studies and in social studies. The college plans to match this in other curriculum areas. Some students expressed dissatisfaction both with access to information technology and the quality of the equipment. Although there are 118 personal computers in the college, a ratio of one to 13 students, in practice only some 24 machines are openly available to students to use in their own time. Even these machines have to be booked in advance, with sessions sometimes being restricted to a maximum of one hour. About half the computers are becoming dated and do not match the provision available in local companies. Fifty-five per cent are models which are not sufficiently powerful for many of the software packages currently in use. However, the college has recently purchased 16 new computers and has plans to upgrade its information technology facilities further.

91 There are 124 study spaces in the library. During some peak periods it is very busy. Independent learning areas, for example for mathematics and social studies students, supplement the study spaces available to students in the library. Space for the bookstock of 20,000 volumes is scarcely adequate. The library has a computerised catalogue system with two student access points. A microfiche reader provides access to the Hampshire County catalogue. Students are able to use the video viewing facility. The annual budget is approximately £10,000, which is small for the number of students. The allocation of this budget is proportionate to the number of students in each department.

92 The quality of the library service is good. There is a good range of periodicals and journals. The quality of the bookstock is satisfactory in most curriculum areas, although students on social care courses found

some textbooks were not available when required. There are too many old textbooks in modern languages and insufficient learning materials to cater for the growth in GNVQ courses.

93 An independent learning centre is located within the library area. It is well equipped with information technology, compact disk read-only memory (CD-ROM) databases, interactive video and electronic mail facilities. The centre is the main facility for open access to information technology workstations and its facilities are valued by students. It is extensively used.

94 Both library and independent learning centre staff provide a high level of assistance. However, both full-time and part-time students expressed concerns about the closure of the library and learning centre during college holidays. The college should review library and learning centre opening hours.

Accommodation

95 The college operates on a single site close to the centre of Alton. Its buildings were designed for the purpose, and constructed in phases between 1978 and 1994. They comprise five single-storey brick and prefabricated panelled structures, some of which are connected by covered pathways. They have pitched or shaped roofs, are well maintained and are set in pleasant landscaped grounds. There is good access for the many students with limited mobility.

96 There are 13 single-storey, prefabricated classrooms most of which are in good condition. However, one of the prefabricated buildings is in a poor state of repair. A creche is located in another prefabricated building. It is comfortable and provides places for 16 children.

97 Recent additions to the buildings provide attractive teaching, learning and communal spaces. The two buildings known as the Stevens and Forum buildings house a large hall and an attractively-furnished and welcoming careers centre. The large, bright hall has retractable-tiered seating which enables the college to take advantage of its commercial and public relations potential as a centre for performing arts and public meetings.

98 The layout of buildings is interesting, but confusing to visitors and new students. For example the precise location of the main entrance and reception area cannot be identified without first entering one of the many doorways. There is a need to improve signposting to assist visitors and potential clients to find their way around the site. Internal decoration is good and walls are used effectively for display. The college is cleaned regularly and the buildings and grounds are well kept.

99 There is a good range of general-purpose classrooms, most of which provide a comfortable and appropriate environment. Some have retractable dividing panels which enable rooms to be doubled in size when large groups of students need to be accommodated. However, some group

sizes are too large for the rooms being used. The quality of specialist accommodation is generally good but some of the rooms used for art have insufficient daylight and some laboratories contain too much furniture, resulting in difficult working conditions.

100 The students' refectory and coffee shop are bright, clean and of an appropriate size. Staggered coffee, lunch and tea breaks ensure that most students can be seated comfortably to eat. The coffee shop supplements the students' main refectory. It is well used and provides a good service. There is no space designated for students' social activities and it is difficult for them to find rooms for social activities when the refectory and coffee shop are operating at full capacity. The college should address the lack of suitable social accommodation for its increasing number of adult students. A room is also needed for the use of the student union executive.

101 In addition to the library, there are nine open-access study areas for students to use. Most are located in busy thoroughfares. They provide a total of 325 study places but, in the absence of appropriate social areas, some are used for social purposes.

102 The strategic plan includes a well-thought-out accommodation strategy. All teaching accommodation is allocated and monitored centrally by a head of department with a cross-college responsibility for its management.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES

103 The particular strengths of the college are:

- its good reputation
- good governance
- good management
- effective liaison with parents and local schools
- high-quality teaching
- excellent examination results
- a well-qualified and enthusiastic staff
- good-quality accommodation.

104 If it is to build upon its existing strengths the college should address the following issues:

- the implementation of a college-wide quality assurance system
- the development of marketing materials
- the development of its management information systems
- a strengthening of the counselling service
- the achievement of uniformly high-quality student guidance and tutorial support.

FIGURES

-
- 1 Staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)

 - 2 Percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)

 - 3 Percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)

 - 4 Enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)

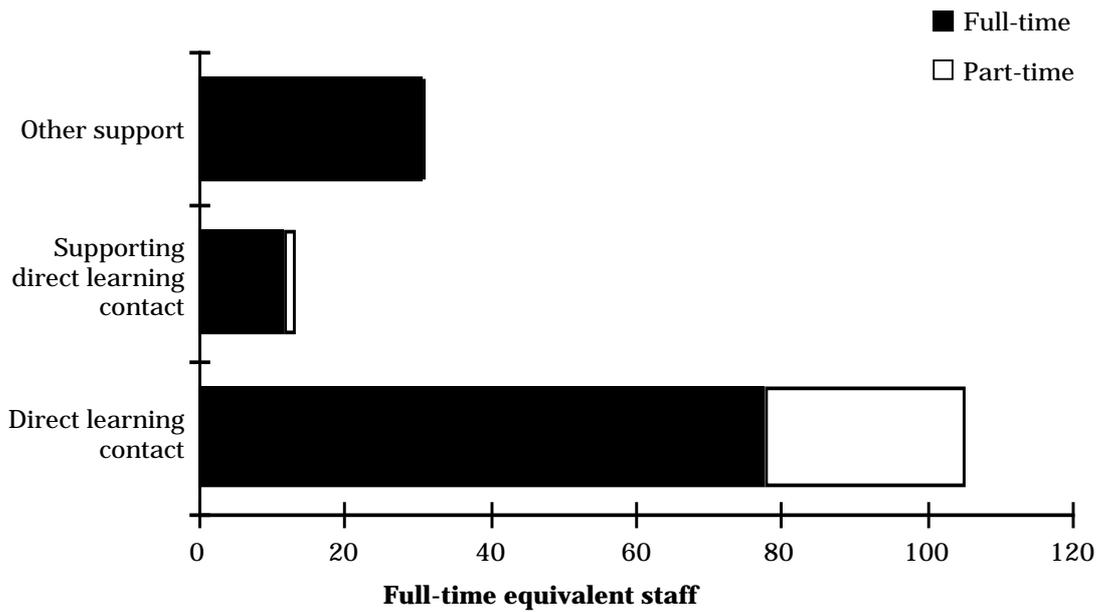
 - 5 Income (for 16 months to July 1994)

 - 6 Expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)

Note: the information contained in the figures was provided by the college to the inspection team.

Figure 1

Alton College: staff profile – staff expressed as full-time equivalents (1994-95)

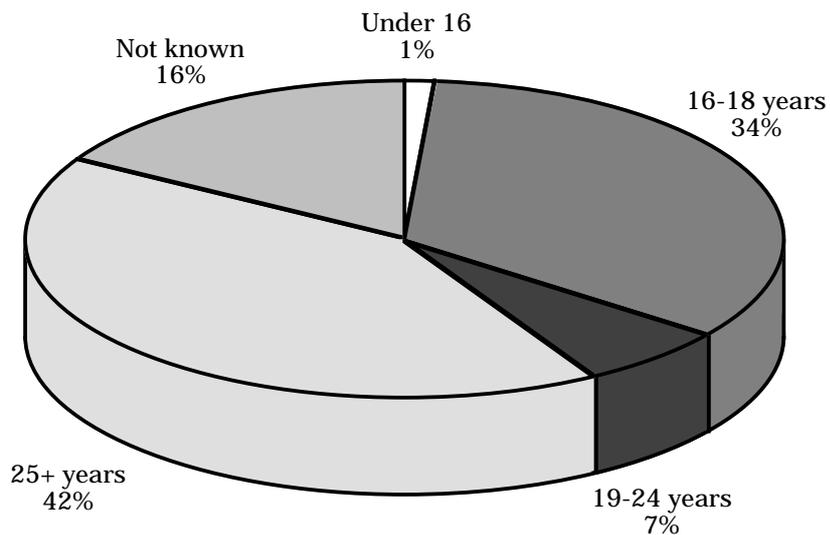


Full-time equivalent staff: 150

Note: there are also six full-time equivalent teachers engaged in adult non-vocational work

Figure 2

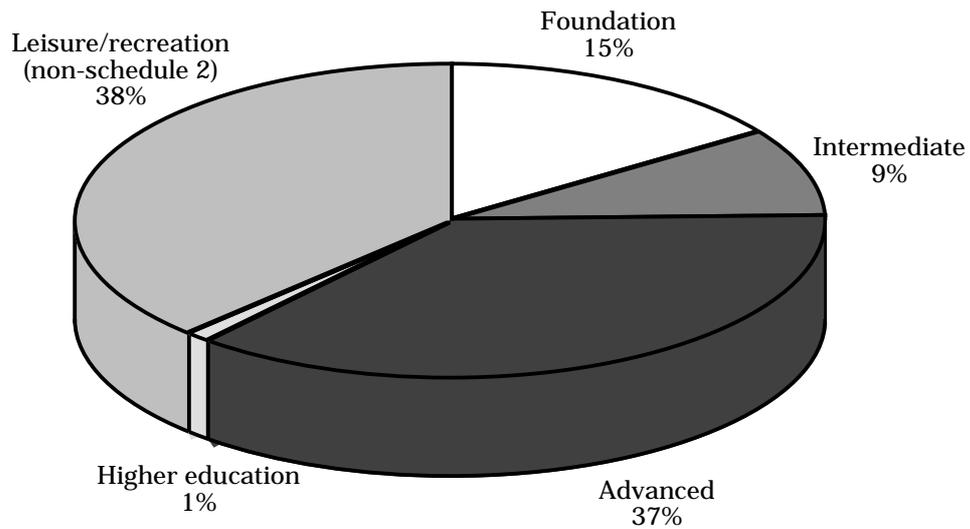
Alton College: percentage enrolments by age (1994-95)



Enrolments: 3,795

Figure 3

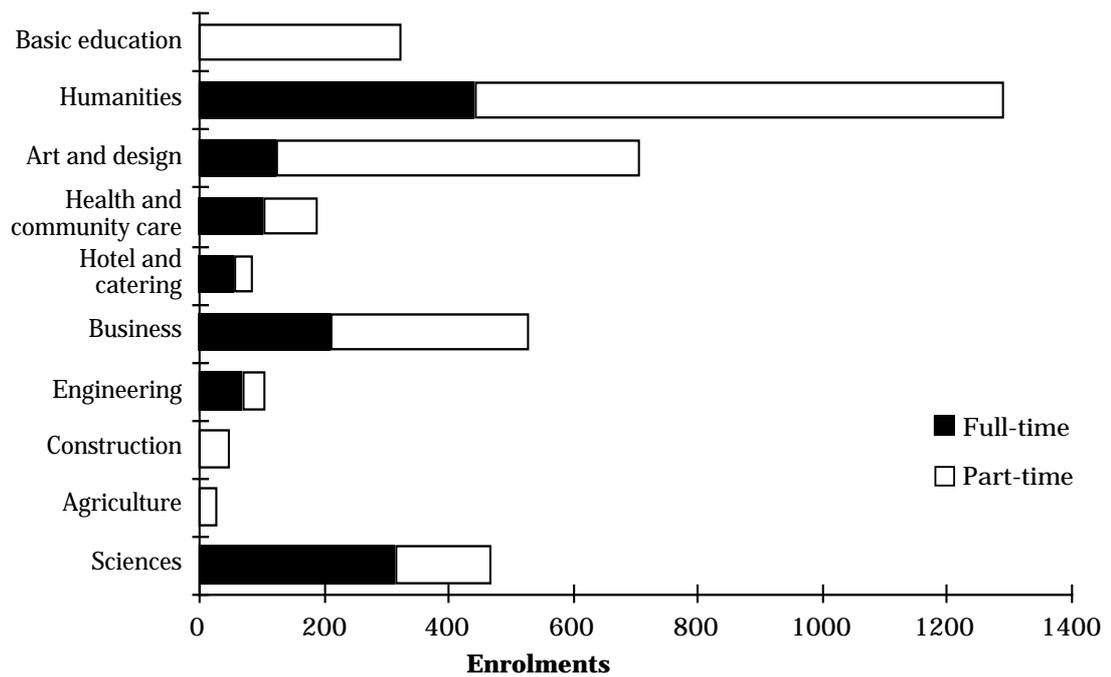
Alton College: percentage enrolments by level of study (1994-95)



Enrolments: 3,795

Figure 4

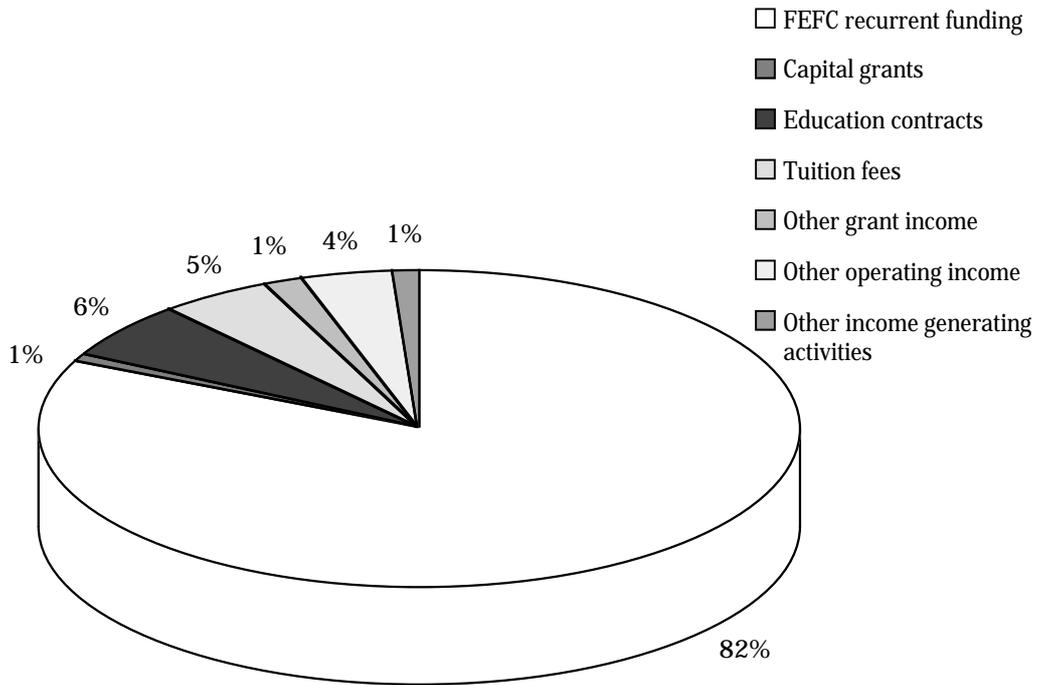
Alton College: enrolments by mode of attendance and curriculum area (1994-95)



Enrolments: 3,795

Figure 5

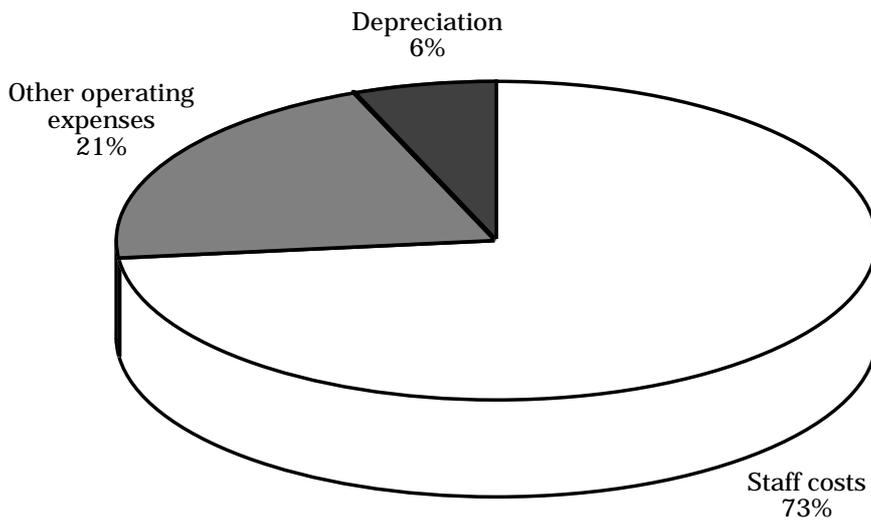
Alton College: income (for 16 months to July 1994)



Income: £5,287,000

Figure 6

Alton College: expenditure (for 16 months to July 1994)



Expenditure: £5,102,000

Published by the
Further Education Funding Council
March 1995